

**Kevin Fellezs**

### **Wiseguy Opera: Music for Sopranos**

**Christopher:** Our thing once ruled the music business. Did ya know that? We bankrolled acts . . . blacks, everybody. Paid the deejays or busted heads to get ‘em played on the air.

**Adriana:** There were some great Italian singers.

**Christopher:** Fuckin’ A. Franki Valli, Dion, The Rascals, that whole Philly thing. My dad used to talk about those guys. Now? Fuckin’ drum machines, some ignorant poetry and any fourth grade dropout *ditsoon* is “chairman of the board.”

(“A Hit is a Hit” | 1010)

### **Verismo and Contemporaneity**

“Music,” William Congreve once said (in *The Mourning Bride*), “hath charms to soothe the savage breast.” The savage breasts that gather at the Bada Bing!, contrary to Congreve, are more often moved to confrontational, if not violent, outbursts while the soundtrack underscores their antagonisms. David Chase, in his decision to forgo music scoring and rely exclusively on source music,<sup>1</sup> heightens the role music performs in *The Sopranos*.<sup>2</sup> In an interview on the HBO website devoted to *The Sopranos*, Chase reveals the strong link music provides for the series.

**HBO:** Music’s a very important part of the show as well. Can you tell us a bit about the music?

**[Chase]:** I don’t know why that is. Music has always been intrinsic to me with movies. It’s television but I consider it movies but . . . as a writer I’ve always been inspired by music. I listen to music while I’m trying to think of ideas and I just like it. So even from the beginning I said [that] we really need to have a good music budget. And originally people said “Why, I don’t get it, what do you mean music budget?” And, now I think they see it. It creates a tremendous mood and it also creates a sense of contemporaneity. I think that’s the word, whatever the word is, contemporaneousness. (Bogdanovich Interview)

The HBO series, while often described as soap opera, can also be compared to “real” opera. To cite an example, when Frank Sinatra sings “It Was a Very Good Year” over scenes tracing the activities of various characters in the opening episode to the second season (“Guy Walks into a Psychiatrist’s Office” | 2001), the correlation between opera—soap or otherwise—becomes apparent. Montage and music relate to each other in complicated and expository ways. Ellen Willis, in her article “Our Mobster, Ourselves,” writes,

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<sup>1</sup> Source music (also known as diegetic music) is music that the characters are aware of—usually music from a radio or “live” band. Music scores, on the other hand, are only heard by the audience and are “extra diegetic,” i.e., not part of the film’s “reality.” Chase seems to have abandoned a strict adherence to this policy in the second and third seasons, however.

<sup>2</sup> David Chase talks about his music scoring decision in his interview with Peter Bogdanovich on the DVD release of the first season of *The Sopranos*.

While the sheer entertainment and suspense of the plot twists are reminiscent of Dickens and his early serials, the underlying themes evoke George Eliot: The world of Tony Soprano is a kind of postmodern *Middlemarch*, whose inhabitants' moral and spiritual development (or devolution) unfolds within and against the norms of a parochial social milieu. (26)

While Willis sees correlations between *The Sopranos* and Dickens and Eliot, I maintain that Rossini, Verdi, and Puccini can also be seen as precursors to the series in the interrelation of music, plot, and character development.

The *verismo* (realist) style with which Puccini was loosely associated with closely resembles the form *Sopranos* creator David Chase envisioned for the series. *Verismo* opera, influenced by movements outside of music such as the naturalist writings of Emile Zola, developed libretti concerned with peasants, petty criminals, and their everyday lives. This stood in stark contrast to the operas of, say, Wagner, which dealt with gods and goddesses or historical and mythical figures—certainly not the starving artists of Puccini's *La Bohème*. As one commentator notes, “The aim of the Italian *verismo* composers at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was to write emotionally raw operas with realistic depictions of everyday people” (Tommasini 1). These “everyday people” were invariably drawn from the underworld or the artistic communities. The parallel between *verismo* opera and *The Sopranos* is more than just thematic, however.

The comic savagery of Gioacchino Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, Giuseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto*, and Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca* are readily recognizable in the dark comedy of *The Sopranos* (particularly if one recalls Jonathan Miller's famous production of *Rigoletto* [English National Opera, 1982] recast as a 1950s New York mob story). Where Rossini wielded his comic ear in grand *buffo* (comic) style (particularly in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and *La Cenerentola*), Verdi drew on what Italian censors of the time derided as obscene and repellant scenes of debauchery and vice. Puccini's popular audiences, meanwhile, recognized in the melodies and lyrics a dramatized reflection of their emotional and social lives, no matter the often melodramatic libretti. The writers of *The Sopranos* depict similarly drawn characters and situations that point up both the characters' exaggerations as well as their realism and have drawn similar complaints.

While Puccini relied on a supposedly true story for *Madama Butterfly*, many *verismo* operas naturally relied on figures familiar to their audiences—some pulled from vernacular cultural practices such as *commedia dell'arte*. Similarly, in scenes that have been commented on elsewhere, the many references to popular culture—including those that point directly to Mafia movies such as Paulie “Walnuts” Gualtieri's Cadillac horn that plays the love theme from the first *Godfather* movie or Michael Imperioli's (as Christopher Moltisanti) reprise of the foot-shooting scene from Martin Scorsese's *GoodFellas* in which he reverses the victimized role he once played—help carry a self-conscious and humorous element throughout the series. There are also the many malapropisms sprinkled throughout the dialogue such as Tony's announcement that his girlfriend, Gloria, looks like “one of those Spanish princesses in a painting by Goyim” (“Amour Fou” | 3011). The juxtaposition of black humor and violence, comic play and serious themes, while not the focus of this essay, do link *The Sopranos* and *verismo* opera such as *Rigoletto* and *La Bohème*.

Ironically, as Chris Heath reveals in his *Rolling Stone* cover story on *The Sopranos*, the one significant conflict with HBO was about the show's title: They thought that *The Sopranos* would confuse people, that people would expect it to be about opera singers (46). Music, in fact, is self-consciously utilized throughout *The Sopranos* both as commentary and material for character and plot development similar to the way they complement each other in opera. In "A Hit is a Hit" (1010) from the first season, the business world of Tony Soprano merges somewhat uncomfortably with the social climbing Carmela is advocating. The urging that Christopher, a nephew of Tony and Carmela as well as an up-and-coming lieutenant in Tony's crew, receives from his girlfriend, Adriana, to widen their social contacts parallels this development. These two women stand on opposite ends of a continuum: Carmela looks for respectability and financial stability, while Adriana searches for a life other than Carmela's "stretch marks and houseful of kids." Music plays a big part in Adriana's hopes for a more fulfilling life. While Adriana's hopes are not realized in this episode they are later re-visited in the third season when she opens her club, The Crazy Horse, with alt-rock band, The Miami Relatives ("The Telltale Moozadell" | 3009).

The plot of "Hit" also involves the negotiations between Herman "Hesh" Rabkin, a Jewish associate of the Soprano organization, and Massive Genius, a rap entrepreneur, in an episode that addresses the racial dynamics in rhythm-and-blues recording history. While Tony and his crew faced down challenges to Hesh's music empire from Massive G (a storyline that later evaporates), Meadow Soprano's involvement with her school chorus group as well as her vocal performance in the first two seasons are seen, by Carmela as well as Meadow, as a strategy for academic advancement and upward social mobility. Janice (aka Parvati) Soprano, in the third season, engaged in a life-long search for spiritual and material enrichment, finds a sense of fulfillment in Christianity and composing Christian music, using her "born-again" faith as an avenue to explore her growing interest in more orthodox spiritual teachings. It doesn't hurt that, as she remarks to Tony, "In the larger sense, Christianity's more about a business with the CCM . . . Christian Contemporary Market. It's the fastest growing sector in the music business today" ("Amour Fou" | 3012).

The "contemporaneity" that Chase creates is due, in large part, to the music soundtrack of *The Sopranos*. Music functions in the series, as Chase's remarks to Bogdanovich indicate, as a means of relaying information about a character or a situation that is otherwise "silent," or unspoken. Dialogue and imagery convey information that the soundtrack either supports or emphasizes. For instance, in "Amour Fou" (3012), Bob Dylan's version of "Return to Me" plays in the background as Ralph Cifaretto attempts to comfort Rosalie Aprile about the disappearance of her son, Jackie, Jr., following his attempt at "stepping up to the A leagues." Dylan's request to "return to me" echoes Rosalie's hope for Jackie Jr.'s return home. Significantly, Dylan's opening line ("Return to me") introduces the scene and predominates the soundtrack as Rosalie greets Ralph home. Their dialogue enters right as Dylan ends this first line, his song sinking into the background of the soundtrack. Just as significantly, the song returns to predominate the sound mix whenever the dialogue pauses, emphasizing its role as a third "voice" in the scene.

The domestic scene at the Aprile household cuts to the kitchen of the Soprano house where Carmela Soprano is seen in the foreground while Tony enters the house in

the background. Dylan continues to sing, the song tying the two scenes together. In the scene with Tony and Carmela, however, the song underscores the “return” of Tony to the family hearth—as he has just ended an extramarital affair with Gloria Trillo, a woman he met in Dr. Melfi’s waiting room. (Gloria, an exciting but unstable personality, stands in contrast to Carmela, a woman who, in Tony’s words, “doesn’t have those loony tune moods.”) It is obvious, as Tony watches Carmela bake ginger snaps for a church benefit, that he *has* returned home (if only briefly, given the nature of television entertainment narrative), re-assessing his marriage and marriage partner. The lyrics which play over the ending of the scene (where no dialogue is spoken)—“My darling, if I hurt you, I’m sorry”—underline Tony’s renewed appreciation for the relative stability marriage to Carmela provides for his otherwise tension-filled life.

In an earlier scene in the same episode, Jackie Jr. and Dino Zerilli meet with Ralph in order to pay him a part of their “earnings.” As they discuss their business relationship, Dean Martin’s version of “Return to Me” plays in the background. This earlier version of the song—from an era that Tony has referred to as “the good days” of the mob—reinforces the way in which the old rules, and the context in which they were formed, have changed. Martin’s version, evoking the “GoodFellas” era of mob lore, also indicates the ways in which Jackie Jr.’s view of criminal activity is permeated with Hollywood imagery and popular cultural constructions of the Mafia.

Utilizing different versions of this song also illustrates the way in which contemporary concerns impact the lives of these mobsters. The fact that Dylan and Dean represent an antagonistic generational difference nearly forty years ago reveals the way in which the music of the series draws on an audience’s familiarity with popular culture. It is also pertinent that the song both men sing is drawn from the repertoire of Italian Dean Martin (née Dino Crocetti), a “return” to older popular music song that reflects the hopes, if not the realities, of Tony’s agonistic relationship with his two “families” as well as Ralph’s mentorship of a soon-to-be executed Jackie Jr. Importantly, Martin’s version does not play as a “third voice” to the meeting but is almost subliminally inserted into the background of the soundtrack, reflecting the failure of the “old ways of doing things” in the present moment.

In another interview, Chase unveils another aspect of his musical aesthetic.

When I was like 17 or 18 back in [New] Jersey, my friend Donny and I, we used to get high in his basement and we’d put a single on the stereo, like “Peppermint Twist,” and play that single against whatever was playing on the TV, and turn the TV sound off. You would notice strange synchronicities like the rhythm of the cutting of the TV show would miraculously fall in with the rhythm of the song. And the chance juxtaposition of, say, Joey Dee and wheat harvesters rolling across the plans was very funny. *It blew out the idea of “score.”* (Rucker interview, emphasis)

Chase is clearly aware of the way soundtracks can increase the interaction between the music and the action onscreen—the music not only cues the audience to any number of interior processes a character may be going through but is also used by the character her/himself to engage the process. The character and the viewer are thus often hearing the music in a similar, if not identical, way. In a larger sense, because there is no scoring, the

music that is selected to accompany the series contributes significantly to the visual images.

### “Core ‘Ngrato”

As one readily sees, Chase’s construction of “contemporaneity” is set in opposition to non-contemporaneous social life—an opposition between an imagined past of honor- and tradition-bound social interaction and a contemporary world that has forsaken those social binds, letting loose a relativism that undermines, for example, the fraternal codes of the Italian mob. For the moment, I would like to focus on a song whose performance occurs in the ultimate episode of the third season (“Army of One” | 3013), when Corrado “Junior” Soprano sings the classic Neapolitan song, “Core ‘Ngrato.”<sup>3</sup> Here, the role of source music is accentuated, since it is one of the few times that a character performs the music and allows both the audience and the *dramatis personae* to come together as one listening group. As we learn through Adriana’s questioning of *consigliere* Silvio Dante’s wife, Gabriella, “core ‘ngrato” means “ungrateful heart,” a subject with which Tony is only too comfortable. Themes of infidelity, familial tensions, and betrayal by family and childhood friends bear witness to the questions that “Core ‘Ngrato” enunciates. This song underscores many of the themes that have been explored throughout the series: infidelity, ingratitude, insolence, and indifference, particularly in the ways that they undermine or emphasize the rhetoric of fidelity to familial and fraternal obligations. As Chase, in an interview published on HBO’s *Sopranos* website, remarks,

[C]ertainly I think [*The Sopranos*] describes American materialism. American . . . psychobabble. The victim society that we have, that we’re developing. *The society of non-accountability*. You know, the rugged Yankee American guy, who doesn’t really seem to exist anymore. So in that sense it’s an American phenomenon. But then I go to Europe and I hear the same things. That it’s a welfare state and half the people are on the dole and nobody takes responsibility, you hear the same thing all over. (“Interview”; emphasis mine)

In the case of the Soprano *familia*, Naples and “Core ‘Ngrato” links the old world sensibilities that Tony attempts to maintain in the face of contemporary American “materialism and psychobabble.” The song also underlines the sentimentality “Core ‘Ngrato” serves for the Italian-American gangsters.<sup>4</sup> The placement of the song in a funereal situation also contributes to its poignancy. Contrasted with the first two season finales where the audience is a witness to the Soprano family and close associates in scenes of seemingly normative domestic bliss, the funeral dinner underlines the tensions that threaten the cohesion of both of Tony’s “families,” his crew as well as his genetic family.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The lyrics to “Core ‘Ngrato” can be found at the end of this essay.

<sup>4</sup> Though the Soprano family immigrated from Ariano di Puglia and Avellino, Italy, it is Naples that the Soprano crime family visits in order to establish new business. As “Core ‘Ngrato” is a Neapolitan song, the “Naples connection” is clear.

<sup>5</sup> The first season ended with Tony, Carmela, Meadow, and AJ at Artie Bucco’s Nuovo Vesuvio restaurant. Not insignificantly, Silvio, Paulie, and Christopher are also enjoying a repast. Tony, in a

In the episode (“Army of One” | 3013), Paulie “Walnuts” expresses his growing disaffection with Tony in a scene prior to Uncle Junior’s singing in the restaurant (the scene also becomes an opportunity for Paulie and Johnny “Sack” Sacramoni to further the cross-generational conflict that is yet another site of tension and express the strain between “traditional (mob) family values” and “American materialism and psychobabble”); Christopher, who has always voiced impatience with the slow pace of his “career,” is in an increasingly tense relationship with Tony over the handling of Jackie Jr.’s part in a card game heist; and, Artie Bucco, owner of Nuovo Vesuvio, who has always maintained an ambivalent friendship with Tony Soprano, has been recently questioning the role Tony plays in his life—a question which has been aggravated by his impending divorce due, in part, to his friendship with Tony as well as his unrequited love for Adriana.

Additionally, Meadow exits Jackie Jr.’s funeral dinner after throwing pieces of bread at Uncle Junior—indicating both her suspicion concerning Jackie Jr.’s actual murderer (despite her argument with Kelli Aprile) and her growing antipathy toward her father’s business and business associates. It is also significant that she leaves halfway through Uncle Junior’s rendition of “Core ‘Ngrato.” Her gesture, not only the throwing of bread but her invocation of Britney Spears (“Oops, I did it again . . .”) in opposition to Uncle Junior’s Neapolitan song, accentuates the tensions between “traditional” Italian mob codes of familial fidelity and patriarchal obedience with Meadow’s growing independence and antipathy towards the “family business.” Her articulation of her growing autonomy—at least, as she perceives it—is shaped through her defiance of Tony’s authority in her mocking of her granduncle’s singing as well as her physical escape from the dinner. As she announces to Tony, before running away from the funeral dinner, “This is such bullshit!” (“Army of One” | 3013).

If those problems weren’t enough, Tony and Carmela are bickering over the educational direction of AJ. The knowledge that AJ also suffers from the “family curse” (anxiety attacks) causes Tony added pressure; he cannot make his son realize that “the world [doesn’t] run on his feelings” (“Army of One” | 3013) by sending him to a military academy. Tony also realizes that the same code of behavior that he hoped a military academy would have instilled in AJ was once provided by Mafia “rules” such as *omerta* (code of silence). But this, too, has changed. As Christopher remarks to his running mate, Brendan Filone, “Maybe one reason things are so fucked up in the organization these days is guys runnin’ off, not listenin’ to middle management . . . We have to stick

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reflective mood, toasts his family, reminding them, “Someday soon, you’re going to have families of your own. And if you’re lucky, you’ll remember the little moments . . . like this . . . that were good. Cheers” (“I Dream of Jeannie Cusamano” | 1013).

The second season ended with scenes of Meadow’s graduation party intercut with scenes that wrap up the stories in previous episodes. The seemingly normative scene of domestic bliss that both Soprano “families” display at the graduation party is undermined by the scenes of the various ways in which Tony’s business activities have impacted several lives negatively. The sequence ends with a large amount of money, some of which will end up in Tony’s pocket, at a card game. The camera returns to Tony, smoking a cigar and looking apprehensively towards the next season. With Uncle Junior still under house arrest and the ongoing police investigations, the happy gathering at the Soprano home is anything but “normal.” The Rolling Stones song, “Thru and Thru” that accompanies the scene speaks to a similar sentiment of unrequited love that “Core ‘Ngrato” articulates.

together. Why be in a crew? Why be a gangster?” (“46 Long” | 1004). Why, indeed, be someone who “lives outside the rules” if all the old rules are being thrown out?

The balancing Tony must accomplish between “tradition” and “contemporaneity” is exemplified by the plaintive tone of “Core ‘Ngrato.” The anxiety Tony feels between the pull of old-fashioned values and the resourcefulness that he must employ in order to maintain control over his crew and his home puts an enormous strain on his own coping abilities. When Uncle Junior sings of once having given his heart to a now-rejecting lover, it reflects how Tony’s own conflicts center on the two things dearest to his heart—his crew and his family. The crew with their infighting are partly fueled by the wider problem of wiseguys who, rejecting the old rules of mob conduct because they no longer have the stomach for “the penal experience” (Tony to Dr. Melfi in “The Sopranos” | 1001), can no longer be counted on to act on a stable set of guidelines—guidelines that provided formerly unassailable parameters for discipline and punishment. Meanwhile, his family provides no refuge from the pressures of mob life. Rather, his son and daughter resist his authority at every opportunity while Carmela reveals herself to be a stronger adversary than the stereotypical “Mafia wife,” all adding to his already dangerous levels of *agita* (anxiety).

Contrast “Core ‘Ngrato” to the song played at Livia Soprano’s funeral dinner (“Proshai, Livushka” | 3002), when Janice attempts to coerce everyone to reminisce about Livia. The song, “If I Loved You,” sung by Shirley Jones in her screen debut role as Julie Jordan in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Carousel*, highlights the contrast between Janice’s desire to enact a remembrance of a recently-departed maternal figure and Carmela’s voiced recognition that Livia was not only unloved by most of the people gathered at the remembrance but also “a dysfunctional” woman.<sup>6</sup> In the song’s denial of an obvious and apparent affection, “If I Love You” confronts “Core ‘Ngrato” as the opposing poles of familial and communal cohesion and disintegration. While “If I Love You” speaks of a “non-existent” relationship “Core ‘Ngrato” speaks of unrequited love.

It is also significant that of all the many deaths in the series, these are the only two that are given “musical accompaniment”—their own death arias, so to speak. While *Carousel* uses “If I Loved You” in a playfully facetious manner, *The Sopranos* uses the song to delineate the very real antagonism between Livia and her “mourners,” notably her son Tony, who was almost killed because of her. There is no playfulness here but a darkly rendered dysfunctional mother/son relationship that underlines the fragmented, and fractious, nature of Tony’s professional and familial bonds. Equally significant is the relationship between verismo opera and David Chase’s recognition of the similarities between Livia and his own mother (he has been quick to point out, however, that his mother never wanted him murdered) as well as his apparent focus on the musical element of the series.

These themes—family and business tensions, conflicts between “traditional” values and what Tony registers as a form of utilitarianism or instrumental relativism—unfold through the metaphor of unrequited love. Searching for meaning, Tony only finds

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<sup>6</sup> Like many of the scenes in *The Sopranos*, this dark moment also has its humorous elements. Christopher, who the audience knows is stoned on a combination of marijuana, cocaine, and alcohol, begins a long-winded monologue about death and the possibilities of identical personalities. The audience, aware of Christopher’s debilitated state, laughs knowingly at his recursive monologue, while the other houseguests in the scene listen in bewilderment to his convoluted non-sequiturs.

more questions and unresolved dilemmas. As in the second season's ending, when the Rolling Stones' Keith Richards sings of unrequited love ["Thru and Thru"], Uncle Junior also sings of instability and inconstancy. The failure to count on traditional forms of behavioral norms and regulations puts Tony's control over his two families in jeopardy. This is especially important in a world where no one is bound to any rules in an "age of non-accountability."<sup>7</sup>

As "Core 'Ngrato" makes clear, Catari is inaccessible. In similar ways, the insular world of the mob precludes any possibility of finding relief from these tensions on the "outside." Tony sees himself "to be the sad clown; laughing on the outside, crying on the inside" ("46 Long" | 1002). This sad clown, tormented by unresolved conflicts, finds only attenuated resolution in the psychiatric sessions with Dr. Melfi. When "White Rabbit" plays over scenes of Tony's growing depression ("Down Neck" | 1007), the "little pills" that Tony takes "don't do anything at all." The profound dissonance between his responsibilities as mob boss, father, and husband with his valorization of "traditional" values are reflected in the lines of "Core 'Ngrato": "Core, core 'ngrato/t' aie pigliato 'a vita mia/tutt'è passato e nun'nce pienze chiù!" (Ungrateful heart, you wrenched my life from me!) For Tony, the "ungrateful hearts"—beyond his would-be killers (Uncle Junior and his mother, Livia)—include Salvatore "Big Pussy" Bonpensiero who "ratted out"; Meadow, who fights against Tony's authority at every turn while accepting his financial and material sustenance; Paulie, who is dissatisfied with Tony's ruling "against" him in a sit-down with Ralph Cifaretto ("Army of One" | 3013); Jackie Aprile, Jr., whose continual refusal to listen to Tony's advice to "smarten up" ("The Telltale Moozadell" | 3009) eventually leads to his demise; and Janice, who chafes at having to bow to his will in order to secure his favors but accepting the protection her brother's reputation and position give her. This partial list elides the very real tensions his in-laws, Hugo and Mary DeAngelis, provide as they condemn Tony's business activities while enjoying his largesse. Finally, and most importantly, Carmela is also an "ungrateful heart" who, instead of easing Tony's tensions, "never thinks of [his] pain."

Carmela, though, has very similar anxieties. Her conflicts between Roman Catholicism and the knowledge regarding Tony's mob activities engage the same psychological and moral compass as those provided by the tensions between "traditional" values and "non-accountability" for Tony. Her platonic affair with Father Phil also addresses how the secular and the sacred co-exist in the world of the Sopranos.<sup>8</sup> Their mingling of sexuality and spirituality registers the same mixture of ambivalence and ambiguity that Tony experiences in his inability to integrate his vision of the "right" way to act and the ways he is compelled to act in order to maintain his professional world. As

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<sup>7</sup> As real-life convicted Mafia boss John Gotti stated in a Discovery Channel documentary, "Why do you think [the Gambino family] fell apart without me? Everyone became their own boss, set their own moral codes, set their own reasons, their own rhyme, and that's the end of it. . . . That's the end of the ballgame" (qtd. in Hampson 3A).

<sup>8</sup> In fact, music enters their conversation in "College" (1005). When Father Phil asserts, "You know what's remarkable . . . if you took everything Jesus ever said, add it up, it only amounts to two hours of talk," Carmela responds, "No . . . but wait, I heard the same thing about the Beatles. Except it was, if you add up all their songs it only comes up to ten hours." Her non-sequitur throws Father Phil slightly before he re-inserts religion back into the conversation, but it is an indication of the part music performs in the constellation of elements that comprise the Sopranos universe.

she states to Father Phil regarding various Biblical concepts, “Well, let’s face it, Father. We’ve got some major contradictions here” (“College” | 1005). Father Phil’s response is to cite love as a method of seeing through these contradictions.

Carmela’s relationship with Father Phil also allows her to articulate her perspective, in the time-honored tradition of Christian dogma, on the world of human activity in opposition to a higher plane of existence. Carmela faces her own dilemma in a highly sexualized confession and communion with Father Phil. Her confession reveals how her dreams of material well being conspire to assist in her denial of Tony’s actual business “practices.” The platonic—though highly sexualized—nature of her relationship with Father Phil underscores as well as undermines her urge to reconcile her moral quandary. While Father Phil willingly participates in the sexually charged atmosphere of his female parishioners’ spiritual quests (a situation for which Carmela eventually reprimands him (“I Dream of Jeanne Cusamano” | 1013)—although it is her petty jealousy about his relationship with Rosalie Aprile that initiates her censure), it is Carmela’s dialectic between the earthly and the heavenly that situate her own moral dilemma.<sup>9</sup>

Still, while seeking counsel from Dr. Sig Krakower, who tells her bluntly to leave Tony, Carmela argues feebly against this advice by enlisting to her aid parental responsibilities, the greater material comforts a man of Tony’s income provides, and the sanctity of holy matrimony (“Second Opinion” | 3007). Dr. Krakower points out, however, that she is only misleading herself. Her unwillingness to divorce Tony will need other sources of validation. Later, when Carmela confesses to another priest, Father Obosi, about the ways her life with Tony seem to compromise her creed, she finds the validation she needs in order to remain married to Tony (“Amour Fou” | 3012).

**Carmela:** The psychiatrist said that I should leave my husband. May God forgive me, when he said that, it seemed so right.

**Fr. Obosi:** You made a sacred vow. Divorce is out of the question, unless . . . Is he abusive, your husband?

**Carmela:** Not to me but he is unfaithful. He’s a good man, basically. But I talked to Father Intintola about all this years ago and here I still am.

**Fr. Obosi:** And you love your husband?

**Carmela:** I do. I love my husband and I love God. But my life is financed by crime. His crime. \$50,000 to my daughter’s college . . . The psychiatrist says it’s all blood money. And now to maybe bring another child into this?

**Fr. Obosi:** God understands that we all live in the middle of tensions. You say your husband has good in him. What you have to do is learn to live on what the good part earns.

**Carmela:** The . . . the what?

**Fr. Obosi:** There’s a point inside yourself—an inner boundary beyond which you feel culpable. You’ve got to come to an awareness of where that line is and forego those things which lay without it.

**Carmela:** The church has changed so much.

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<sup>9</sup> Carmela has maintained a series of flirtatious relationships with various men—notably Victor Musto, the “wallpaper artist” (“Bust Out” | 2010), and her tennis teacher, Ed Rusticcio (“Mr. Ruggerio’s Neighborhood” | 3001), as well as Father Phil.

**Fr. Obosi:** It's a complex world.

**Carmela:** Learn to live on the good part. Forego those things which lay without it. I think I can do that, Father. I'll try.

It is apparent in this exchange that Carmela has found a process for working out the contradictions between what she believes as spiritual truth and how her belief system is attenuated by Tony's activities. It is also obvious that in her view, Tony's criminal activities are solely his own and that, legal practice or no, she is no accomplice to his mob life. She is merely being financed by crime but feels no moral entanglement beyond accepting its spoils. When she gives up her sapphire ring, she is practicing Father Obosi's advice—advice that is clearly meant to keep her satisfied with her marital choice. In a rudderless world, Carmela has managed to find a means to hold on to the fiction that her husband's working world and his domestic one can remain separate.

### **“Con Te Partiro”**

In a similar fashion to the way “Core ‘Ngrato” functions for Tony, Andrea Bocelli's rendition of “Con Te Partiro” (“I'll Go with You”)<sup>10</sup> operates for Carmela. Carmela's scenes are not often underscored by music. In this sense, “Con Te Partiro” holds greater significance—it almost functions as Carmela's *leitmotif* in “Commendatori” (2004). In one scene, Carmela, Angie Bonpensiero, and Rosalie Aprile are having lunch when Bocelli's singing inspires Rosalie and Carmela to express their admiration for his singing as well as leading Carmela to confess that, “God, he is so handsome . . .” (“Commendatori” | 2004). The luncheon conversation, centering around the two themes of death and divorce—indeed, both embodying distinct forms of separation—is reflected in the lyrics to “Con Te Partiro.” In the song's promise to share in new experiences, to visit “countries I never saw and shared with you,” each of these Mafia wives hears a distinct meaning. Angie contemplates divorce from Big Pussy; Rosalie has lost her husband, Jackie, to cancer; and Carmela is physically separated from Tony while he conducts a business trip to Naples, Italy. More poignantly, Carmela has been separated from Tony in ways that have nothing to do with physical proximity. Her anxiety over Angie's decision more accurately reflects her unarticulated concerns about her own marital situation than her desire to be a true friend. Consoling Angie, Carmela is talking to herself when she remarks, “In the end, I know you're not going to leave him. I know you won't do that” (“Commendatori” | 2004).

The romance that “Con Te Partiro” represents for Carmela points to the lack of it in her life. (The allure that Italy holds for her also operates on Paulie as he attempts, unsuccessfully, to connect with “real” Italian people in Naples.) In her imagination, Italy represents an Old World order of romance, family, and Catholicism—a world of stable relationships between honorable people. Her connection to Tony—especially in light of his life outside of the marital home: his *goomahs* (girlfriends), his criminal activities, and, meaningfully, his trip to Italy *without* her—appears more tenuous the deeper she questions her position as wife and mother. In fact, the lack of romance in her marriage

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<sup>10</sup> The Italian lyrics and English translation of “Con Te Partiro” can be found at the end of this essay.

has spelled near-disaster to her sense of moral equilibrium as she has flirted with the idea of extra-marital affairs.

In another scene, “Con Te Partiro” plays in the background as Carmela and Janice discuss the “medieval fucking outlook” of Tony and his business associates. Janice elucidates the madonna/whore complex that rules these men’s view of male/female relationships. Again, Carmela’s “leitmotif” underscores the lack of feminist perspectives in the world of these underworld families. While articles on *The Sopranos* have argued for the strong women in the series, this episode undermines such easy announcements.<sup>11</sup> Carmela is unfulfilled despite her material wealth. The promises that “Con Te Partiro” enunciate are empty for Carmela and the distinctions that some commentators delineate between Carmela and “old-style mob wives” are superficial and do not challenge the power relations between mob husbands and their wives. Her outbursts, for instance, fail to change Tony’s extra-marital habits or his criminal decisions. While he certainly respects her in ways that seem to attenuate older stereotypes of husband/wife relations in popular imaginings, the idea that Tony and Carmela are equals is not entirely supportable.

In addition to these scenes, the song enters in the final scene as Carmela, putting away some freshly laundered clothes, hears Tony announce his return from Italy. Carmela, shown in her domestic role as housekeeper, is situated in opposition to Tony’s other women. In Italy, Tony conducted business with Annalisa Zucca, the beautiful acting boss. Though there was no physical affair, the sexual attraction between them was palpable. The dichotomy between Carmela as wife and mother and the *goomahs* and women such as Annalisa pose in Tony’s mindset undermines Carmela’s seeming self-awareness of her position in her world. She cannot “compete” with these women and even if Dr. Melfi is correct in assuming that Tony will never leave Carmela (though Dr. Melfi doesn’t preclude the possibility that Carmela may leave Tony), Carmela’s position in Tony’s world will be fraught forever within a madonna/whore binarism. “Con Te Partiro” announces itself to Carmela as a promise, forever broken.

**It is in this way that the two songs, “Core ‘Ngrato” and “Con Te Partiro,”** both explicate and illustrate the spiritual and psychological dilemmas that Tony and Carmela find themselves in at the end of three seasons of fighting, loving, accommodation and negotiation. The Sopranos opera, however, does not look to remain static in this tense and dramatic situation; the libretto is leading to a dénouement. Whether that ending is tragic, comic, or some combination of the two, remains to be seen.

In any event, it is only a matter of time before the fat man begins to sing.

**“CORE ‘NGRATO”** (music: Salvatore Cardillo; written for Enrico Caruso, 1911.  
Translation by Anne Lawson.

Catari, Catari, pecché me dici

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<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, the comments by Drea de Matteo, who plays Adriana, in Chris Heath’s *Rolling Stone* article in the March 29, 2001 issue. Also, Ellen Willis argues in an article included in this volume that Carmela is Tony’s “emotional equal; she does what she likes, tells him off without hesitation and, unlike old-style mob wives, knows plenty about the business” (Willis, 26).

sti parole amare;  
peché me parle e 'o core me turmiente,  
Catari?  
Nun te scurdà ca t'aggio date 'o core,  
Catari, nun te scurdà!  
Catari, Catari, ché vene a dicere stu parlà  
ca me dà spaseme?  
Tu nun'nce pienze a stu dolore mio,  
tu nun'nce pienze, tu nun te ne cure.  
Core, core 'ngrato,  
t' aie pigliato 'a vita mia,  
tutt'è passato e  
nun'nce pienze chiù!

**“UNGRATEFUL HEART”**

Catari, Catari, why do you tell me  
only words of bitterness,  
why only things that torment me  
Catari?  
Don't forget that once I gave you my heart,  
Catari, don't forget!  
Catari, Catari, why do you say  
these things that make me suffer?  
You never think of my pain,  
you never think if it, you don't care.  
Ungrateful heart,  
you wrenched my life from me

**“CON TE PARTIRO”** (Italian lyrics and English translation courtesy of  
bocellionline.com. Music and lyrics by L. Quarantotto and F. Sartori)

Quando sono solo  
sogno all'orizzonte  
e mancan le parole,  
si lo so che non c'è luce  
in una stanza quando manca il sole,  
se non ci sei tu con me,  
Su le finestre  
mostra a tutti il mio cuore  
che hai acceso,  
chiudi dentro me  
la luce che  
hai incontrato per strada,

Con te partrio'  
Paesi che non ho mai

veduto e vissuto con te,  
adesso si li vivro'  
Con te partiro'  
su navi per mari  
che, io lo so,  
no, no, non esistono piu'  
con te io li vivro'

Quando sei lontana  
sogno all'orizzonte  
e mancan le parole,  
e io si lo so  
che sie con me,  
tu mia luna tu sei qui con me,  
mio sole tu sei qui con me.  
Con te partiro'  
Paesi che non ho mai  
veduto e vissuto con te,  
adesso si li vivro.  
Con te partiro,  
su navi per mari  
che, io lo so,  
no, no, non esistono piu',  
con te io li rivivro.  
Con te partiro'  
su navi per mari  
che, io lo so,  
no, no, non esistono piu'.  
con te io li rivivro.  
Con te partiro'  
Io con te.

### **“I’LL GO WITH YOU”**

When I'm alone  
I dream on the horizon and words fail;  
yes, I know there is no light  
in a room where the sun is absent,  
if you are not with me, with me.  
At the windows show everyone my heart  
which you set alight; enclose within me  
the light you encountered on the street.

I'll go with you,  
to countries I never saw and shared with you,  
now, yes, I shall experience them.

I'll go with you on ships across seas  
which, I know, no, no, exist no longer;  
with you I shall experience them.

When you are far away  
I dream on the horizon And words fail,  
and, Yes, I know that you are with me;  
you, my moon, are here with me,  
my sun, you are here with me,  
with me, with me, with me.

I'll go with you,  
To countries I never saw and shared with you,  
now, yes, I shall experience them.  
I'll go with you on ships across seas  
which, I know, no, no, exist no longer,  
with you I shall experience them again.  
I'll go with you  
On ships across seas which, I know,  
No, no, exist no longer;  
with you I shall experience them again.  
I'll go with you,  
I with you.